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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MURR BACKS GHANEM AS PRESIDENT, URGES
USG TO ENCOURAGE MARCH 14 TO COMPROMISE

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) In a one-on-one meeting with the Ambassador on 10/3, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr urged that the USG, in meetings with MP Saad Hariri in Washington, encourage a consensus president. The costs of a March 14-elected president are too high for Lebanon to bear, Murr argued. Hariri can then use the USG request for consensus to get March 14 hard-liners Samir Geagea and Walid Jumblatt in line. Murr claimed that he and Hariri, in a two-hour meeting on 10/1 (the eve of Hariri's departure for the U.S.), had agreed that MP Robert Ghanem was the "least-bad" consensus choice. While Murr still thought LAF Commander Michel Sleiman was preferable, he recognized that constitutional and political issues made Sleiman's election unlikely. Murr said that he had a long meeting with Ghanem and pronounced himself satisfied that Ghanem would not be under Syrian or Hizballah control as president. In Murr's view, it was better for March 14 to concede on the name of the president rather than on the substance of the program a new president and cabinet will pursue. Separately, Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi said that a crisis with pro-Syrian forces was inevitable. The question was whether to provoke the crisis over the presidency or the cabinet program; he preferred the latter. End summary.

MURR ASKS USG TO PUSH HARIRI ON CONSENSUS

-- SO HARIRI CAN USE MESSAGE WITH ALLIES

¶2. (S) Elias Murr used the 10/3 meeting with the Ambassador to pitch the idea that USG officials, in their discussions with MP Saad Hariri in Washington, push Hariri toward a compromise presidential candidate. The cost to Lebanon of a March 14 "confrontational" president, elected by "half-plus-one" of the parliament, is not worth it, Murr said. For taking such provocative action when Lebanese yearn for consensus, March 14 will lose what popular appeal it retains. Murr painted a dire scenario of Hizballah, Aounists, and other pro-Syrians taking over key installations in the country in reaction to the election of a March 14 president, while the security situation deteriorates. The LAF will either split or be forced into inaction. It is much better to have a consensus president, he argued.

¶3. (S) Murr said that, in a two-hour meeting with Hariri on 10/1 (on the eve of Hariri's departure for the U.S.), Hariri revealed that he agreed with Murr that it is better to have a

consensus president. But, he said, he has a problem with Lebanon's Christians, who do not want to see Lebanon's president emerge from a "Muslim" deal between Hariri and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri (who also would be speaking for Hizballah). He also stated that he has a problem with hard-line March 14 partners like Walid Jumblatt and Samir Geagea, who argue that, if March 14 concedes the presidency that is their right to elect (given their parliamentary majority), then they lose everything, including the ability to prevail in the next legislative elections. So Hariri and Murr agreed that, if the U.S. asked Hariri to work for consensus, he could then use the U.S. message to get the rest of March 14 on board for consensus. Oh, the Ambassador responded, the USG, not Hariri, will be blamed for abandoning March 14's presidential candidates. It's all for a good cause, Murr noted, to maintain March 14 unity while not taking Lebanon to the catastrophe that a confrontational presidency would provoke.

MP ROBERT GHANEM: "LEAST BAD"
CONSENSUS CHOICE FOR PRESIDENCY

14. (S) Murr said that he and Hariri had also agreed that MP Robert Ghanem was the "least bad" candidate for a consensus president. Noting the rumors about Ghanem's links to Syria (some of which Murr himself spread), Murr said that he had a long meeting with Ghanem that persuaded him that Ghanem, as president, would not be under Syrian and Hizballah control, presuming he had sufficient backing from the moderate Arabs and international community. Murr said that his father, MP Michel Murr, would bring ten of the Aoun bloc deputies to Ghanem's side, with Ghanem thus being the tool to reduce Aoun

BEIRUT 00001547 002 OF 002

to size. Hariri believes that Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri will come around to Ghanem's candidacy. While noting that he himself still preferred LAF Commander Michel Sleiman as president, Murr said that Sleiman's chances of winning were quite slim, given the constitutional technicalities, March 14 suspicions against him, and a general feeling that the president should not again come from the ranks of the military.

15. (S) Pushing again for a USG message to Hariri that Hariri could then use with March 14 hard-liners and Christians, Murr argued that it was far better to concede on the name of the president rather than on the substance of what the next president, PM, and cabinet should do. The Ambassador retorted that the pro-Syrians seem to be insisting on concessions across the board. Hizballah spokesmen are adamant that the president cannot come from March 14, and they also insist that the next cabinet reject UNSCR 1559.

GHAZI ARIDI: PICK YOUR CRISIS
(AND HE PREFERS LATER, NOT NOW)

16. (S) In a separate meeting, Minister of Information Ghazi Aridi shared with the Ambassador a conclusion similar to Murr's: March 14 and the international community cannot avoid a crisis in Lebanon, Aridi said. The question is whether the crisis will be over the name of the president or over the subsequent development of the cabinet slate and program. Aridi -- breaking with his political boss, Jumblatt -- argued that it is better to concede on the name of the president. The Lebanese public yearns for some kind of consensual choice, and so March 14 would be seen as taking the moral high ground. Then, Hizballah will appear unreasonable when it tries to block the cabinet formation and distort the cabinet program with its demands later. Hizballah will insist on rolling over "protection of the Resistance" language from the current cabinet statement into the new one, Aridi said, despite the fact that, after last summer's war, the Lebanese public prefers UNSCR 1701. The Ambassador expressed skepticism that a weak president would

be of much use in helping March 14 overcome Hizballah's demands on the cabinet formation and cabinet program.

COMMENT

¶7. (S) Murr tends to embellish. Thus, we do not know whether he and Hariri really coordinated their positions as closely as Murr insists. But we do know that Hariri, like Murr, is deeply worried about the pro-Syrians' reaction to a March 14 president elected by "half plus one." We also know that Hariri has been toying with the name of Robert Ghanem (who, as we have pointed out before, is a decent fellow but does not come across as particularly strong-willed). Perhaps the Saudis, fearful of conflict in Lebanon, have been encouraging Hariri to compromise, or perhaps Hariri wants to ensure the smoothest start possible for the premiership he covets.

¶8. (S) The main point for us, it seems, is to emphasize again and again, to one and all, how important March 14 unity is. For Aridi and Murr are correct in that the presidency is only one battle: even if March 14 decides to do a tactical retreat on the presidency in favor of a candidate like Ghanem, March 14 leaders need to stay united in order to force through the best possible cabinet and program. If they concede on Ghanem and then on the cabinet formation and program, Syria will have managed to reassert strong influence despite the absence of Syrian troops on the ground. If March 14 splits, Syria, in effect, wins.

FELTMAN